

First meeting of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council (FPC)

Wednesday, July 27, 2011, 1 – 4 pm

Charlton Public Library, Dexter Room

In attendance: Commissioner Scott Soares, Department of Agricultural Resources
Commissioner John Auerbach, Department of Public Health
Deputy Commissioner Gary Moran, Department of Environmental Protection
Commissioner Julia Kehoe, Department of Transitional Assistance
Commissioner of Education designee: Katie Millet
Katherine Bishop, Representative Steve Kulick's staff
Daniel O'Brien, Legislative Aide for Senator Michael Knapik
Valerie Bassett, Community Based Nutrition and Public Health Expert
Frank Carlson, Carlson Orchards, Food Processor and Handler
Jeff Cole, Executive Director, Mass Farmers Markets, Direct to Consumer Marketing
Mike Scuderi, Director of Marketing, Costa Produce, Food Processor and Distributor

The group was welcomed by Commissioner Scott Soares and members introduced themselves.

Commissioner Soares mentioned that Helen Harris Caulton, Springfield City Hall, has been appointed to the position of Public Health Expert on the Council, however she was unable to attend this meeting.

Commissioner Soares presented an overview of the Food Policy Council and Food Policy Council Advisory Committee. [View Presentation](#)

Discussion to identify the Food Policy Council chair Commissioner Kehoe suggested that before appointing a chair, the FPC should check in with the legislators to see if they have an opinion. Jeff suggested that an acting chair be appointed and nominated Commissioner Soares, which was seconded by Frank Carlson and unanimously approved.

Valerie Bassett suggested that the Council might gather base line data about policies, status of protecting farmland, recruitment of farmers, and health issues that are available from Council members.

Commissioner Soares added that it might be valuable to have FPC members share presentations regarding baseline information available through their agency or contacts at upcoming meetings.

Review of Food Policy Councils and future support Commissioner Auerbach: This isn't the first Food Council that's been established. There have been many city and state councils over the years and across the country that have been quite successful in terms of action steps as well as Councils that have not met their objectives.

It would be helpful to review other councils and get advice. He described that they will provide assistance in terms of research and policy impact opportunities working through the Harvard School of Public Health Catalyst Council. The Harvard Catalyst Center has agreed to have an ongoing relationship with the Council for research and support. He introduced Professor Kirsten Davidson, Associate

Professor, Head of the Public Health Nutrition Program, Harvard School of Public Health who described their support for the FPC. She introduced Adena Cohen-Bearak, Program Coordinator, Community Health Innovation and Research Program who summarized their work to date. [View Background Paper](#)

Setting guidelines and establishing priorities

Commissioner Soares: Suggested that the group use Robert's Rules going forward, which was unanimously approved by the Council. He will also provide some draft bylaws for the Council to review.

Commissioner Auerbach: What are the categories of projects/topics that we could do that might be action oriented? I came up with five to discuss and would like to get an initial idea of the council's preference.

1. Gathering information and making it available. It can help policy makers to have info in one place.
2. Bully pulpit – taking an issue to draw attention to issues that might help policy makers take notice.
3. Proposing legislation
4. Policy decisions that don't require legislation could be recommended such as Executive Orders that change purchasing practices for examples, or regulation changes.
5. We could also make recommendations in any area about what farmers and businesses might have as goals or what they should do to meet goals to raise awareness of relevant issues.

Commissioner Kehoe: This calls for a broad strategy considering that there are so many stakeholders. There is a real opportunity to weigh in on federal issues such as the Farm Bill, as well as controversial issues relating to SNAP and low income stake holders. The Council could convene public meetings to be able to weigh in at the federal level. The group that isn't really here is the supermarkets. MA residents have increased their spending of SNAP benefits with a strong benefit to the supermarket industry. There may be goals that the industry could help us in supporting.

Jeff Cole: Before I would feel comfortable making any of these recommendations, we need representation from those industries on the Committees to have the credibility to move forward on such recommendations.

Commissioner Soares: We could have public hearings for advice from existing groups on establishing food systems.

Valerie Bassett: We may want to start with the benchmarks – then a GAP analysis to think about where we want to prioritize. So we can give ourselves some time. The meetings could be in the winter so we would have time to frame theme. We could also weigh in on budget cycles on state and federal programs.

Commissioner Soares: There is some urgency focusing on the federal and congressional issues that are related to the Farm Bill, if the Council has interest to issue some recommendations and priorities.

Katie Millet: Is USDA having listening sessions that we should take advantage of relating to the Farm Bill? It would be good for us to be at some of those listening sessions.

Commissioner Soares: We should have something prepared to address what might be in the Farm Bill. The cycle we are going through this time for the Farm Bill is different than in the past. We don't know if the debate will go faster or slower. There haven't been listening sessions this time. It may be driven by legislators. We have four NE reps on the Ag Committee – and if you add the NE states we have 10 members on the Ag Committee. Between Commissioners and Secretaries we are already talking about priority areas as well as national and regional organizations regarding suggested priorities. We should have one pitch to federal delegations with other NE states if we can. We could have a compilation of priorities from NE and the Council could review for communication from this council. It would be a short term effort for this Council for a very important piece of legislation. This could be an item for an upcoming meeting. The Farm Bill has about 70 percent of the funds supporting nutrition issues. On another note, would Commissioners Auerbach's suggestions be a good idea to have included in the bylaws?

Commissioner Auerbach: Are there other time sensitive opportunities? Two weeks ago we passed a school food bill. There are various changes that will be occurring in the schools such as the competitive foods to be sold. That's going to mean training needs for the schools to make the changes. Criteria are provided but no menus. There might be an opportunity for the Council to weigh in with an opinion. For example, should schools try to set priorities in purchasing a certain percentage of locally produced produce? We wouldn't advise them without knowing the capacity. The passage of the regulation may provide opportunities for training for schools or policies. The regulations are far reaching far beyond school food services – it includes foods before and after school and fund raising programs etc. Competitive foods will be addressed on the federal side – it's a complex piece of what is going on. We have more than 29 districts purchasing local. We have a Harvest Week in Sept. focusing on local products. A benchmark could be that the Council supports the Harvest Week and encourage schools to purchase local. Milk is the biggest issue in the nutrition bill and there are questions coming in about it to understand the regulations for 2012-2013 school years.

Valerie Bassett: We could look at these issues as well as a few pieces of the bill that we could weigh in on that could be standards for schools for local purchases. There were also changes in the purchasing legislation for local purchases for schools and higher institutions. The Council could set some goals. It would be time sensitive. It could be used for other institutions to think about local purchases – a bully pulpit.

Jeff Cole: Another time sensitive issue would be the some guidance on WIC re: conversion for SNAP spending. We have a whole generation of behavior that needs to be changed. It would be great to get the cash voucher program to all farmers' markets.

Commissioner Auerbach: For the next meeting I can get an update on where we are in terms of WIC spending at farmers' markets.

Valerie Bassett: The Grocery Access Task Force on Retail Access call for approaches for how that group will work in terms of setting their goals and they will meet in January or February 2012.

Commissioner Soares: We might invite them to give a presentation to the Council. I would like to come back to the capacity question. If there are more requests for local products the growers can increase capacity.

Commissioner Auerbach: Have different organizations adopted the policies with a percentage requirement of local ingredients and have they had any trouble meeting those goals? Can a school buy 25% of local food? It should be a goal not a requirement. The agricultural community can expand to meet the demand.

Frank Carlson: The school system is off season compared to the local growing season, which is beyond our control. Some of the schools staff can't handle fresh produce because the kitchen and staff are not equipped or trained. The Farm to School program has been a real boost to local agriculture.

Jeff Cole: Growers can add acreage to meet the demand. But there is a lack of skill and infrastructure – the kitchens aren't being built for processing fresh food.

Valerie Bassett: We can ask all schools to make every effort to use more local but in the food system analysis look at issues.

Commissioner Soares: It would be interesting to show the schools how they can do it. We've seen some success with case studies of schools at a cost that was equal to or less than prepared products. Those case studies could be compiled and sent out to schools as part of the promotion of local food use.

Frank Carlson: With obesity being such an issue the education for better eating needs to start with the school. Additional guidelines and suggestions and training could be provided to schools. Maybe some of the old kitchens with more equipment need to come out of mothballs. If kids are involved it helps to change behavior.

Commissioner Auerbach: There are best practices that could be available for schools. It is very complicated. There are ways of solving the problems. Kids that are resistant to fresh produce had been the focus of school programs to change their interest/preferences. We could highlight the components of successful programs and promote the recommendations from those successes.

Katie Millet: it's not just the children; it's the families as well. We have had tools to introduce fresh produce to children. We have also had programs with a multiple generation focus for produce education.

Commissioner Soares: We don't want to jump in without knowing where we are, but we have some knowledge of Farm to School. Might we catalogue best practicing for schools as a first effort for the FPC?

Harvard School of Public Health agreed to the cataloging request.

Commissioner Auerbach: Can Harvard looking at other states with Farm to School programs with similar growing seasons like MA?

Frank Carlson: It would be worth looking at fresh processed products as well.

Valerie Bassett: Moved that the cataloging of best practices for schools using local produce be the FPC's first priority with and focus on increased local purchases. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Auerbach and passed unanimously.

Setting up future meeting dates and locations

Commissioner Soares: Dates for the next meeting will be coordinated through MDAR.

Jeff Cole: Could we meet at the Big E?

Commissioner Soares: It can be difficult getting in and out of the building.

Commissioner Kehoe: In September we will be launching a program to test incentives for people on food stamps to buy healthy foods in Hampden County. We could meet in Holyoke and co-promote that program, as well as identify a meeting location.

Commissioner Auerbach: Might we highlight Nuestra Raices with their creative approach to urban farming?

Commissioner Kehoe: We could try to work in the Big E as well.

Commissioner Soares: The next meeting's agenda will include a presentation by the Alliance, a discussion about the composition of the Advisory Committee categories and subcommittees, and an overview from various council members that speak to the issues in the legislation. We will have a link on our web page with reports, links, and action items, related to the FPC. The next meeting will be in September and another meeting in November with a focus on the Farm Bill. The November meeting can also include a presentation by Harvard Catalyst regarding schools.

Public comments and discussion

Betsy Johnson, Chair of the Massachusetts Food Policy Alliance, shared a letter about how the Alliance helped the Council become established.

Jean McMurray, Worcester Food Policy Council, congratulated the Council on their first meeting and shared her expectations that much can be accomplished with so many groups having a strong dialogue.

Brad Mitchell, Farm Bureau, asked that a recommendation be passed to the Governor's office for the vacant FPC Food Safety Expert position is someone with expertise for On Farm Food Safety, considering the critical importance of the issue.

Chris Coffin, American Farmland Trust, shared her enthusiasm about the Council. This is exactly what we were hoping to have happen. She was also support of the vacant FCP seat focusing on the Food Safety Farm perspective. The MA council is one of the only councils with farmland preservation and protection as part of its charter. AFT is a player in the Farm bill – they are going to start wiring a bill in

the Senate by January. The council could help with additional education of the congressional delegation. They all need to be extremely committed. Whatever role the Council can have in making that happen would be important. BMP for Farm to School – the National Farm to School may have some information already on that. Some of that work may be going on.

Dr. Lauren Smith, MA Department of Public Health it might be helpful instead of a compilation of the efforts, you might focus instead on efforts and how they relate to the Council's goal in order to help with making priorities for the Council.

Valerie Bassett: What's the status of that recommendation for the vacant position?

Commissioner Soares: The names are still under review as far as I know.

Jeff Cole moved that the FPC ask the Governor's office to consider a candidate with an agricultural and food safety background. Frank seconded it and the motion was unanimously passed with a friendly amendment to have it happen as soon as possible.

3:05 pm meeting adjourned